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CMCL Pride Sunday — “On Living Up To Our Reputation”

Genesis 1:27-31a

Happy Pride!

If that sounds like a strange phrase to come out of the mouth of a Mennonite pastor, it's probably because it is! And not just because too few Mennonite churches/pastors are “welcoming,” “open and affirming.”

It's because “pride” is, at best, an alien concept for Mennonites. We definitely have considered it a vice, not a virtue, even as we practice it quite religiously under the guise of faux-humility. I mean, really, if you think you're so amazing that you have to purposely stitch a mistake into your quilt, just to make sure you didn't accidentally make it perfect, *is that really humility?*

We've never really had “Pride Sundays” here at CMCL, at least not that I've known of. And I did consider other names: Welcoming Sunday, Inclusion Sunday, and they just didn't cut the mustard. It came down to remembering that CMCL is having these Sundays because we are joining in with Lancaster Pride, and the greater Pride movement around the country.

We are the joiners — the lucky ones to be drawn into the party. So, who are we to re-name it, or somehow walk back the depth of joy and audacity of Pride? “We” — by which I mean the church, in the largest sense, are just lucky to be allowed to have our booths at the party, considering all we have done, historically to keep everyone in a twist of shame over our bodies and over physical expressions of love.

It's sort of like communion. We can get mixed up at church, and think *we're* the ones hosting the meal, when it's Christ's table we're all invited to. We're just lucky enough to get to have the party at our house, but we're the guests, too.

If you came in through the Parrot Gallery this morning we had the perfect illustration of this. Someone is having a wedding here today — in all likelihood it's someone from Iglesia Peniel, the congregation that uses our sanctuary on Sunday afternoons. I have no doubt that they communicated with our office about this, but somehow the reminder got lost in the sending or receiving. But the result is that we walked into a wedding feast, set up and ready to go in our own church building this morning, and it's happening even though we aren't officiating it, and we're not even invited!

Do you know how many same-sex weddings happen outside the church?

Most.

Because of the long history of exclusion, most of the time we are so lucky as pastors to even be invited. Which is as it should be. Because Love goes on. Love and commitment will be blessed by God, regardless of the church's blessing. It's one of the reasons I chose, “City Hall” by Vienna Teng as the offertory song, as a reminder that the feast goes on ... Love isn't waiting for our blessing. None of the business of being a welcoming church is *ours*. We are so lucky to join *God's* welcome. To be fellow paddlers on the river of Love.

When it comes to “pride” and “welcoming,” I'm still humbled and amazed at

the welcome I receive, as a straight, cis, Christian clergy person at Pride — despite all the history I represent, I am lavishly welcomed.

By the way, these words I bring you this morning probably won't end up fitting neatly into the "sermon mold," but are more of a love letter, a torrent of words that will probably not have three neat points with a catchy conclusion.

One of the most meaningful moments of welcome I have ever experienced was at Mennonite Convention 2015 in Kansas City. At that point our denomination was twice the size it is now, because Lancaster Conference, and a handful of other miscellaneous congregations and conferences were still a part of Mennonite Church USA.

The delegate assembly was having conversations about what it meant that some congregations and pastors in the denomination were continuing to make the choice to put themselves "at variance" with the denominational teachings about marriage being only between one man and one woman.

A decision was put before us: would we continue to hold up the document that made being welcoming a "variance" resulting in discipline of pastors and congregations?

Before the vote, the room of delegates — maybe 1,000 of us (I'm poor with numbers, this number would need to be confirmed), were asked to stand if we knew that someone we loved would likely be hurt by the vote about to happen.

More than half that room stood.

And then more than half that room followed that up by voting to uphold that document, anyway.

I was angry. Even more so when half of those delegates then left the denomination only weeks later, having just knowingly voted on something that would effect the rest of the denomination years after their absence, and wouldn't even impact themselves.

But more than that, I was devastated, and ashamed.

Pink Menno, a group of LGBTQIA+ Mennonites and allies, had broken into these delegate sessions, to which they weren't invited, to try to have a voice, but were essentially turned away. They were in the hall, watching and witnessing when the vote happened, though. After the vote, they went out into the hallway, through which every since delegate would have to pass in order to leave exit the delegate hall.

And those young people, in their pink shirts, formed a "forest." Spaced out across that hallway, maybe 30+ of them, so that those of us who had voted had to literally weave through them and look them in the eyes following the vote.

I couldn't do it. I had tears streaming down my face, and I just looked at Jay Yoder, one of the leaders of Pink Menno, with whom I'd talked and worked, and I just mouthed the words, "I'm so sorry!" and put my head down to walk by. And they came over to me, Jay did, and held *me* while I cried.

In the moment of being voted *against*, Jay and Pink Menno had the strength, the *pride* in themselves and who they were — the steadfast confidence in a belovedness far greater and deeper than any institution that thought it could control

their welcome and belovedness of God — in which to stand and welcome someone like me, whose words and vote had not held sway in that place.

If I am a welcoming person, it is not because of superior theologizing, but because of this kind of inclusivity and courage that I have not just witnessed, but experienced. Being a welcoming pastor is not a virtue I possess, from which I get to welcome others into something I own. It's a welcome I see and recognize as one of the holiest things I've ever witnessed or experienced. It's the kind of love that the New Testament was talking about when they said, this love is such good news that you'll want to go make everyone disciples of this love!

I believe in this welcome because I believe, in the deepest depths of my soul, that this is good news. *The* good news. That we are welcomed as the selves we really are. And that God wants us to live out of that certainty. That we really ARE creatures made in the image of God, that each of us are made male *and* female, and that being male *and* female is being in the image of God. And that this is Good. Indeed, God created us this way, and seeing the reality of our diversity, was and is very pleased.

This is news that reaches back beyond and before the curses that we have allowed to define us, that reaches back before the stories of our exile from nakedness and innocence and the Garden of Eden. News that reminds us of how we were made, and why, and the delight our created selves, our naked and newest selves. This is the fruit of the Tree of Life, on which we were intended to live.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

There's a bit of a soap box I want to stand on for a few minutes this morning. It's about being called a "one-issue" church. We here at CMCL have been called that from time to time. Among Mennonites in Lancaster, we've often been dismissed as, "oh, THAT church!" "All they care about is *homosexuality*." And, I'm sorry, but anybody who's still using that word, well, you know where they stand.

And I want to go on record as saying I'm both *ashamed AND proud* of being a "one-issue church."

Ashamed? You might say ... *on Pride Sunday?* Ashamed might be an overly strong word, but I'm trying to make a point here. When I say ashamed it's only because, for a "one-issue" church, we've still got a long way to go! If this really is our "one" issue, we're in trouble, because there are plenty of ways we could be more welcoming.

And I'm not worried about more "conservative" churches knowing who we are and where we stand. The ones I'm worried about are the LGBTQ kids growing up in churches, schools and homes where *no one* is telling them they're ok, and darnit, not just ok: that they're AMAZING AND BEAUTIFUL, just as they are. Their questions, their bodies, their dreams, even their critique of the church and society — it's all good.

I'm worried that churches like ours aren't public enough in our welcome for those kids to find us, or their parents. And I'm worried that once they come through the door, we're not welcoming enough for them to not just feel, but *be* safe.

Even though the *we* at CMCL *is* LGBTQ+, *we* could be more transformed by the reality of the diversity of who we are. As an institution, we've still got a long way to go, and if we're worried we're a "one-issue church" and start to feel apologetic

about that, we won't be "THAT" church for very long. I am absolutely certain that God will make sure there's still a "THAT" church, even if it's not us.

And I'm PROUD to be "that" church. I want us to be even more strongly and courageously and boldly and authentically-*humbly* that one-issue church. It's not because I don't care about "other issues." Lord knows I've gotten complaints about the many other issues I've preached about here. But I do NOT believe that giving our all to any one issue will result in being less open to other calls upon us.

I was at our booth at Lancaster Pride yesterday, and every intersectionality you could imagine was there. Care about racism? Being gung-ho on LGBTQ pride does NOT make you less anti-racist. I'm not saying it automatically makes you anti-racist, but those intersections are there, and they're not mutually exclusive, and at their both they are truly symbiotic. We will not care less about the environment, or about non-violence or against war. This is not a pie chart. God's love is parental love — the kind of love that just expands to welcome more children, it doesn't divide up its love.

And God's love is a queer love, that turns jealousy into compersion, "that state of happiness and joy experienced when another individual experiences happiness and joy." And that's the Love that fuels us in Christian community — that same expansive Love.

There's a story that I've told here, probably four times now from the pulpit, And I'm going to tell it again today. After all, preaching is all about repeating Bible stories year after year after year,

Back in the 6th Century A.D. St. Kevin lived in Glendalough, Ireland
As the story goes, he was so holy that he chose to live as a monk restricted to a small "cell" with barred windows, and there he lived a life of isolation and prayer.

So, one day, he was so engrossed in prayer that he stretched out his arms, but his cell was so small that he had to stretch out through the bars on the windows. As he prayed, a blackbird came and laid an egg in his outstretched hand. For some reason, he couldn't retract his hand back through the bars without spilling the egg and breaking it. So, he simply kept his hand outstretched as a nest until the egg hatched, allowing the mama bird to fly back and forth, bringing food for him to eat, and tending to her egg. The story says that he had his hand outstretched for forty days, and the egg hatched on Easter Sunday.

St. Kevin is praised for his patience and kindness and generosity. What a "saint" for selflessly, uncomfortably holding out his hand. Maybe Dr. Seuss heard this story and was inspired to write, *Horton Hatches the Egg!*

I've often thought of this story as a call story — that we (individuals, and institutions like CMCL) don't have control of what comes to land in our hands when we hold them out in openness and expectance. And, according to the story, we sometimes don't even realize we have our hands outstretched. But sometimes things come to us, and we have the choice to accept and nurture and care for the thing that life entrusts to us. For St Kevin, how odd must it have been to find yourself caring for a blackbird egg?

We often look with envy at the eggs that other folks are holding, just because we're humans, and jealousy and envy seem to come naturally to us. But really, I no

longer think of this story as a story of long-suffering generosity and obedience. That interpretation is the ultimate Mennonite faux-humility reading: St Kevin was SO humble that he did this amazing thing, even though it was really uncomfortable.

Nope.

St. Kevin was LUCKY.

St Kevin was BLESSED.

St. Kevin was given the GIFT of an egg to protect. An egg that wasn't even his. A blackbird trusted him when she could find or build no nest that was safe enough for her baby.

And he got an Easter miracle out of it! He got to see new life hatch out of an egg. He got to participate in that bird's surviving and thriving. St. Kevin wasn't the gift-giver, he was the *receiver* of an amazing gift, who had sense enough, faith enough to recognize it.

Any time we, as individuals or churches, look at the beautiful things we are entrusted with as "issues" to take on or not, it would be like St. Kevin, if he'd looked across the stream to his fellow monk, Brother Trevor, and seeing that a *blue*-bird had laid an egg in *Trevor's* hand, and deciding to dump the blackbird egg and go over to catch a bluebird egg, or steal Trevor's.

It just doesn't work that way.

The people and the "issues" of our world aren't Pokemon cards to be traded until you get the one you really like. Any church should be SO lucky to find itself called "THAT" church, or a "one-issue" church, no matter what "the issue" is. No matter what folks looking in from the outside think.

So, if anyone wants to call us a "one-issue" church — bring it on! May we be so lucky to be called that. And may we all live into such a radical treasuring of the calls that come to us, that we, one day, live into the reality of actually *deserving* the title of being a one-issue church.

Because we are NOT a one-issue church — we care about many things. We are called to act on many "issues." And we still have long way to go to be the truly-crazily-welcoming church some folks think we already are.

May we be so lucky as to one day live up to our own reputation!

Amen.

"City Hall," by Vienna Teng. From the album, *Dreaming Through the Noise*. 2006.

Album version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rikj0WMGbDU>

Live version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsQ6vy9PB08>